

#NeverAgainMSD Student Activism: A Response to Ruitenberg’s “Educating Political Adversaries”

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INTRODUCTION

Claudia Ruitenberg’s scholarship has helped introduce philosophers of education to agonist critiques of democracy, and their relevance for school-based political education. In this essay we raise questions about her application of agonist thinking. These questions emerge for us in light of the Parkland activists who were both terrorized and politically activated by the February 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (MSDHS) in Florida, in which a former student murdered seventeen people. Our examination of this case, through a Deweyan transactionalist lens, produces a constructive critique of Ruitenberg’s position, and how a different form of agonist thinking should be used to inform political education.

Ruitenberg’s most thorough treatment of agonist civic education is in her 2009 *Studies in Philosophy in Education* article, “Educating Political Adversaries: Chantal Mouffe and Radical Democratic Citizenship Education.”¹ The thesis challenges fundamental conceptions of political education in a liberal state. Even more controversial is her argument for “educating adversaries” in an era of visceral divisiveness and advancing signs of fascism in nations like the U.S., Brazil, and Hungary.

Agonism is not a singular theory but a set of critiques, emerging out of critical and poststructuralist traditions in political theory against liberal and republican theory’s focus on democratic forms and processes prioritizing consensus, peace-keeping, and order. Democratic theory has too often tried to “fix” pluralism, to make this condition nonviolent and nonthreatening to both

individuals and the security of the republic. Agonist critiques push against that sensibility. “Agonistic pluralism, or simply agonism, is a theory of democracy rooted in the ancient Greek notion of the *agon*, a public struggle or contest between adversaries.”² The theme of this year’s PES meeting is rooted in questions emerging from these struggles.

Ruitenberg’s work on agonism is important and forceful. Her discussion of political emotion, drawing on Megan Boler’s scholarship, constitutes a key contribution.³ Yet the notion of “educating adversaries” needs scrutiny. In order to trouble the trouble of agonism, we need not go beyond agonist critique itself. Tracing the complexities within agonist criticism, we will argue against the *dissociative* agonism used by Mouffe and Ruitenberg, making a case for an *associative* agonism to inform and revise school-based political education. In this article, we review Ruitenberg’s “Educating Adversaries” essay, and then explicate the distinctions between associative and dissociative agonism, arguing that educating adversaries is an approach that will foreclose two powerful aspects of the kind of political education necessary for an agonist democratic sphere: 1) transactional political communication, in the Deweyan sense; and 2) flexible civic identity formations or subject positions, vulnerable to shifting alliances, as well as the critique and empathic reasoning with differing others. Neither of these aspects of citizenship education denies the claims of agonist pluralism. Both of these aspects of political education help prepare students to enter the terrain of agonist democracy.

We begin by reviewing Ruitenberg’s thesis in “Educating Adversaries.” We then explore a larger theoretical context for the dissociative agonism that Ruitenberg, drawing from Mouffe, relies upon for her argument. We then pivot to a short examination of the Parkland activists’ work as an abbreviated case study. With this case in mind, we return to the question of whether “educating adversaries” ought to be the aim of political education in pluralistic democracies, and explore possibilities within associative agonist critique and its connections with critical pragmatist thinking, to answer that question in the negative.

RUITENBERG’S CONCEPTION OF AGONIST POLITICAL EDUCATION

Ruitenbergs’ “Educating Political Adversaries” opens with a critique on deliberative democracy, specifically on the Rawlsian theoretical frame. This critique draws on Mouffe’s political theorizing, positing her model as an alternative to the common models of democracy to generate an alternative discourse among teacher and students about civic and political issues.

Unlike deliberative democracy, which endeavors to overcome conflicts, agonism perceives political conflicts as “a force to be channeled into political and democratic commitments.”⁴ Ruitenbergs suggests that the danger in deliberative democracy lies in its desire to dwindle conflicts. Suppressing social emotions may suspend the manifestation of the problem, or magnify conflicts by suppressing those whose identities or problems constitute the remainders of a majoritarian resolution.

Ruitenbergs parses how agonism is different from the deliberative approach, outlining three differences. The first is that agonism renounces the focus of deliberative democracy on the individual. Centering political life around the individual has glossed over the desire of people to feel a sense of belonging and to be a part of a community. The second difference refers to the exclusion of emotions from the political discourses of deliberation. Deliberative models posit reason at the heart of the political action, and minimize the importance of social emotions as an immanent component of political life. The third point of difference refers to the goals of political discourse. We have already noted that unlike deliberative democracy, agonism does not idealize consensus. According to agonist critics, conflicts and disagreements are crucial for a thriving democracy and for the advancement of a healthy society which confronts (though never entirely resolves) its socio-political tensions through reason and dialogue. The problem is that many current political discourses treat political competitors as enemies rather than adversaries. Ruitenbergs, following Mouffe, calls for a transformation in our understanding of the political and politics. Political opponents are adversaries, a conceptual turn requiring recognition of how power, social structures and human relations are constructed.⁵

This last point is central to Ruitenberg's framework for the education of political adversaries, based on three main elements: (1) addressing political emotions; (2) reconsidering the meaning of the political; and (3) advancing political literacy. The first element highlights the significance of emotions to citizenship education. Traditionally, emotions have not been conceived as part of civic education and their role for advancing vibrant democracy has been underestimated. Emotions have been considered private, and therefore have either not received much attention in political discourse nor in civic education, nor been actively suppressed as barriers to reason and consensus. Ruitenberg contends that it is essential to recognize political emotions as part of citizenship education, but warns against common mistakes of trivializing, individualizing, or instrumentalizing emotions.⁶

The second element in Ruitenberg's framework suggests that political anger is important for advancing a vibrant, dynamic society. She defines political anger as "the anger or indignation one feels when decisions are made and actions are taken that violate the interpretation and implementation of the ethico-political values of equality and liberty that, one believes, would support a just society."⁷ Ruitenberg differentiates political from moral anger, which refers to one's reaction to events based on one's personal values (notions of "the good"), while political anger is evoked as a reaction to conditions of hegemonic power relations (notions of "the just" as pertaining to the social-political order). Ruitenberg suggests that political anger should be taken into consideration when educating young people to recognize political opponents as adversaries and when encountering substantial conflicts.

The third element of Ruitenberg's framework argues for advancing critical political literacy. *Inter alia*, political literacy refers to the ability to read and interpret political disputes, and to recognize how the social order has been constructed, or as she states:

the ability to read the political landscape both in its contemporary configuration and its historical genesis. Another way of putting this is to say that students must learn to read the social order in political terms, that is, in terms of disputes

about the interpretation of liberty and equality and the hegemonic social relations that should shape them.⁸

Ruitenbergs specifically discusses the tendency in school-based political education to refrain from the historical ideological dichotomy of left and right, and to consider this ideological difference as obsolete. The temptation to follow the path of deliberative reasonableness, and to suggest that the traditional ideological left-right political spectrum is either invisible or has lost its relevancy, blurs political conflicts and perpetuates the socio-political status quo.

In sum, Ruitenbergs seeks to fill out Mouffe’s conception of educating adversaries through advancing a critique against Rawlsian-inspired deliberative democratic conceptions of reasonableness. Ruitenbergs distinguishes between the appropriate political emotions stirred up in disagreements with one’s political adversaries, and those emotions ignited by our moral enemies. She also seeks a political literacy inclusive of historical power relations and struggles. Yet, importantly for our purposes, Ruitenbergs cautions that this exploration of “educating adversaries” is preliminary, not “a complete program for the education of political adversaries, both because such an elaborate project falls outside the scope of this article, and because it may well be possible to modify rather than abandon current more deliberatively oriented programs of citizenship education.”⁹ It is a modification we propose here, first by visiting the distinctions between different conceptions of agonist democracy.

WHICH AGONISM? ASSOCIATIVE VS. DISSOCIATIVE

Agonist theory does not represent a unified project, set of goals or even a thick set of “internal assumptions about the nature of the political.”¹⁰ Mouffe delineated agonist types in a 2007 talk, “Between Ethics and Politics,” labeling her variant of agonist theory “dissociative” and other flavors, “associative.”¹¹ Associative agonists include Hannah Arendt, Bonnie Honig, and William Connolly. Mouffe says associative agonists share many assumptions with dissociative versions. Both camps seek to move politics beyond aggregate, prepolitical interests; both deny the existence of a “higher, unchallenged plane

beyond the ebb and flow of a contentious and contingent realm of political articulation”; both seek to “move beyond a deliberative politics which appeals to notions of communicative consensus, public reason, or reciprocity in order to soften deep moral disagreement.”¹²

For all this shared conceptual ground, Mouffe finds associative agonists insufficiently radicalized in their politics. Honig, Connolly and Arendt share her goal of preventing the closure of political debate, practices, and identity formation open to disruption. But these agonist thinkers do not address the key question, “What is to be done?”¹³ The realm of “the political” for Mouffe involves making a determination between conflicting choices which are (at times) irreconcilable through rational processes. Moreover, “the political” is comprised of a hegemonic social order and unequal, unjust power relations. Politics isn’t just a game of identities or contests; it’s about what we should do in the face of difficult choices. This means imagining our political opponents as adversaries who share the same political association but who live within a conflictual consensus, and who experience the wins and losses in their attempts to reconstruct (aspects of) the political order towards more radically egalitarian, just forms. For Mouffe, associative agonists stay locked in the freedom of unending contests and identities, rather than pushing on a praxis.¹⁴ Politics is not just about deconstruction alone; it’s about what we should do, as citizens. Robert W. Glover notes:

The crucial element lacking in associative agonism [for Mouffe] is the creation of a ‘chain of equivalence’ whereby variegated democratic demands that challenge the existing order congeal into a common cause, rearticulate the spaces of politics, and struggle for hegemony through vibrant and contentious agonistic exchange.¹⁵

Is Mouffe’s critique of her fellow agonists justified? Her characterization of different agonisms traces some real disagreements, and her Gramscian-influenced view of the political is distinct from the more poststructural theories of Honig and Connolly. Glover argues that Mouffe’s treatment of associational agonism is “superficial” and “risks overlooking the associative agonism’s

significant potential for fostering radical democratic engagement, receptive to new articulations of identity and difference.”¹⁶ We concur; an associative agonism provides a more flexible orientation for agonist citizenship education than Mouffe’s dissociative version. To explore and defend this claim, we turn to a brief account of the Parkland massacre’s conversion of its survivors into activists against gun violence. Such a violent and rare incident is not intended as a representative example of schooling, nor of politicized students. It is a vehicle for exploring the civic agency of youth within a very visible political conflict in a hyper-politicized cultural moment.

#NEVERAGAINMSD: ANGER AND INDIGNATION AGAINST GUN VIOLENCE

David Hogg writes of his motivation for writing a book with fellow survivor and sister Lauren about the events surrounding February 14, 2018:

Lauren and I are telling our story to show you how we grew up into people who felt like we had to do something and could do something. We definitely think that’s valuable information, and we hope that seeing things through our eyes will give you ideas of your own. Because none of us can do this alone and we need you, basically. But we’re all really different people. We don’t even have the same opinions on gun control. The only thing we share completely is what Lauren said when she was getting started — we were all born after Columbine, we all grew up with Sandy Hook and terrorism and code-red active-shooter drills. We have all grown up conditioned to be afraid. *And we’re all sick and tired of being afraid.*¹⁷

The Hoggs are among a group of activists who have become well known in the aftermath of the school shooting. “We *had* to do something,” David writes, referring to the students’ motivation. These students were changed by the horrific experience of a mass murder event enacted by a 19-year old former student. They experienced an emotional whirlwind of violence, terror, and

grief. In the wake of processing this trauma, anger became a key motivational response for these leaders.

“We *could* do something” refers to the Hogg siblings’ sense that they had agency to act. The students gathering at Cameron Kasky’s house days after the MSDHS shooting had grown up in homes and schools that had prepared them for this moment. Their agency was fed and informed by the formal curriculum and the co-curricular opportunities offered at their suburban school. MSDHS is a well-resourced public school with high graduation rates; it has exceptional co-curricular programs, challenging courses, and committed teachers. It is also located in a state which, in 2010, passed the Sandra Day O’Connor Civics Education Act, which mandated a state assessment in civics.¹⁸

The Parkland students worked quickly with many other groups, in a historic moment brimming with Trumpean resistance, to create their actions and presence on a national stage. Their organizing progress was stunning in scale. Only one week after the massacre, student leaders were visiting government and legislative officials in Tallahassee and Washington, D.C. to protest “the National Rifle Association’s influence on legislators and demand a ban on assault weapons.”¹⁹ Six days later, a group of student leaders was meeting with Paul Ryan, Speaker of the House of Representatives. Less than a week later, they were in a Twitter war with the National Rifle Association, later creating well-produced web-based content to critique the organization’s power in shaping gun laws. The Florida legislature passed a gun control bill, the first in the state in twenty years, on March 7th, three weeks to the day after the Cruz shooting at Parkland, due in no small part to their activist work. Later events included organizing a national high school walk out, and the National March for Our Lives in Washington.²⁰ Some of these students, now alumni, continue to be very visibly active on behalf of gun control candidates and causes, with a present effort to rally the youth vote in upcoming U.S. elections.

Literally hours after the shooting, students were talking with national news media and elected officials about their criticisms of gun laws, political inaction, and school safety protocols. One hour after the shooting, in response to a “thoughts and prayers” tweet by President Trump directed to victims and

families, student survivor Sarah Chadwick tweeted:

I don't want your condolences, you fucking piece of shit, my friends and teachers were shot. Multiple of my fellow classmates are dead. Do something instead of sending prayers. Prayers won't fix this. But gun control will prevent it from happening again.²¹

The immediacy of their response was facilitated by the students' use of social media as a primary communication and organizing tool. Twitter is an adept medium for expressions of rage, disgust, judgment and indignation, directed to the very highest levels of government and elected officials. Students lost no time in using this tool to their organizing advantage, and would later create memes and video content to circulate to great effect, fueling their movement with expressions of grief and anger. In the #Whatif series of video interviews with created by Parkland student leaders, student survivors narrate their experiences of losing best friends or teachers in short video clips.

Parkland activists moved from trauma, to anger, to indignation, to strategy. They resoundingly rejected those politicians offering them mere pity. As Bradshaw argues, “Those who are the objects of compassion may respond with indignation, by pronouncing, ‘No, you do not know my predicament, no, I am not just like you; I want justice and recognition, not sentiment,’” ... but “to become indignant is to assert oneself, to demand justice, and this requires agency, or at least the possibility of it.”²² The Parkland activists used indignation against the adults who offered them platitudes to fuel creative civic actions: from lobbying efforts, demonstrations, and solidarity-building with like-minded groups and diverse allies.

Parkland activists were seemingly well-prepared by their public school experience for these endeavors. Reminiscent of critical political theorists' calls for skills of “articulation,” these students had a diverse array of knowledge to use in becoming political actors, with performance and communication skills notably among them.²³ Their school boasted rich opportunities in journalism, theater arts, and debate. “Nearly all of the #NeverAgain organizers are active

in the school's drama club, school newspaper, or TV station, WMSD-TV, where David Hogg serves as news director and Emma González is active in TV production."²⁴ In fact, MSDHS students had been preparing for debates on the issue of gun control, which explains in part why they could speak clearly to these issues.²⁵ Moreover, MSDHS boasts a challenging curriculum made available to many students. "About 327 students take AP government—that's about 40 percent of the senior class. . . . In the 2013 school year they had 19 AP college-level courses."²⁶ The AP Government teacher has nearly twenty years under his belt in that role, and helped create that curriculum for the district. Several of the #NeverAgainMSD leaders were enrolled in AP Government during the February 14th mass shooting, learning about the power of interest groups like the NRA in their curriculum.²⁷

The Parkland students took up a powerful stance that used political emotion to feed political action. The question of how they were prepared for this work is an empirical one, and only a source of speculation here. What has characterized their responses since February 14th has been not a position or set of positions, not a singular stance or policy recommendation, nor an adversarial stance or identity per se. Their work has been characterized by transactional communications and positionalities in the civic, cultural, and political realms. More than dissociative versions, associative agonism allows for a more open conception of political agency amidst hegemonic conflict.

THE LIMITS OF ADVERSARIAL THINKING: EDUCATION FOR TRANSACTIONAL COMMUNICATION

Dissociative agonism renders a conception of agonist political education which is too rigid and focused on the already-established presence of socio-political conflict rather than on its more fundamental capacity, communication. Recall Ruitenberg's critique of Rawlsian deliberative models of democracy, which opens the door for her agonist reconceptualization of political education in which: 1) political emotions are legitimized, engaged and educated in schooling; 2) political emotions are educated in the context of actual power relations

as seen in historical case studies which can bring out the explicitly political, non-neutral terrain of political struggles along the left-right spectrum; and 3) students are prepared not simply to plug into existing political structures but also for the adversarial work for *reestablishing new political relations*.²⁸ Ruitenberg’s vision of adversarial citizenship follows Mouffe’s thinking by seeking political education which highlights the cultivation of political emotion and translates its insights into political action which aims to challenge hegemonic dominations. Yet what is essential for reestablishing new relations is communication, in the transactional sense. It is communication, in addition to historical and political knowledge of democratic struggles, which readies us to meet as-yet unnamed, undefined, unknown political interlocutors.

The transactional concept first articulated by John Dewey in his 1896 “Reflect Arc Concept in Psychology” paper was later expanded in *Knowing and the Known* with Arthur Bentley, in the last part of his life.²⁹ Contrasted with self-action (self-propelled activity of objects or organisms), and inter-action (action of causal interconnection between two objects or organisms) trans-action refers to a holistic framing of action, with divisions of labor or systems functioning within a concrete whole, or the entirety of the reflex *arc* rather than simply the reflex itself.

Dewey sought to mend the ways that psychology and other scientific disciplines sought to segment the world and human existence into categories which would harden. Inquiry in psychology was focused narrowly on stimulus and behavior, action and reaction, but Dewey knew that the meaning of any one behavior cannot be reduced to one stimulus, any reaction cannot be reduced to a response to a single action. He pushed against inquiry models that prevent a holistic framing of organisms in their environmental, cultural, temporal and spatial contexts. “The state of the whole organism is one of *action* which is continuous, so that reference to the organism as a whole merely puts before us the situation just described: that environmental change *becomes* a stimulus in virtue of a continuous course of behavior.”³⁰

What made the #NeverAgainMSD leaders agentic was their ongoing communicative engagement across individuals, constituencies, and demographics

through a range of media and means. Their diverse engagements with others triggered learning about and evolution of positions, perspectives, and policy critiques. In *Glimmer of Hope*, a collection of stories by the MSD activists, these diverse engagements and evolutions are visible.³¹ Accounts of their meetings with Florida legislators, of their CNN appearance with republican senator Ted Cruz, and of their social media campaigns show their tenacity and skill in talking with and listening to others around topics of gun violence and school safety. They experienced the power of having a political voice, as well as dismissal from politicians and lobbying groups due to their age. Their political positions were not monolithic nor static across their movement but based in what they eventually called common sense gun legislation, and electing people responsive to that position. In addition, their “we” was formed across all these interactions, tweets, meetings, and media appearances: the “we” of young voters and young adults who feel disenfranchised from politics in the U.S.

The “we” created by the #NeverAgainMSD students was a powerful agentic force. Simon Critchley’s analysis of the “motivational deficit” in liberal democracy describes the lack of a motivating conception of ethics that can counter the nihilism and despair of our current political situation.³² Critchley posits three stages of an emergent political consciousness and voice: the first step of “I should act,” the second step of “I can act,” and the third step of “I will act” and “We will act.”³³ Ruitenberg argues citizens face an “articulatory deficit,” as well as an ethical one Critchley sees. But in examining the #Never-AgainMSD student activism, you see neither of these deficits, due to the rich, varied, emotionally-potent communications that shaped their voices, positions, and critiques. Their motivations and their “we” did not emerge ready-made from the trauma of the mass shooting, nor from their civic education in school, but through the public work that they created after the event.

This transactionalist view of their political action can also be applied to the “we” they have created around the thorny American political problem of guns. Dissociative agonism wants a political education to help students understand the history of left versus right political positions over time so that students can have a better historical sense of politics to inform their future engagements.

The gun issue in U.S. culture defies easy left-right identification. Two-thirds of Americans have lived in a household with guns at some point; three in ten adults now own a firearm, and there is great diversity among gun owners.³⁴ Robert J. Spitzer writes, "... for the first 300 years of America's existence, gun laws and gun rights went hand-in-hand. It is only in recent decades, as the gun debate has become more politicized and more ideological that this relationship has been reframed as a zero-sum struggle."³⁵ A dissociative agonism, with an orientation to a simplistic binary of leftist-rightist politics, would miss a lot of the complexity in the debates over gun rights. The #NeverAgainMSD student leaders came to moderate and sometimes diverse positions and stances about gun laws as they engaged in exchanges about these issues with both supporters, opponents, and the multitudes in-between.

Ruitenberg seeks political education to engage political emotion, and develop a critical sense of political history so as to educate students to become adversaries. Citizens will encounter adversaries in the public sphere, but should be educated to communicate with them, in the transactional sense, first and foremost. One does not need a consensus-oriented liberal theory to prefer this associative shift in agonist orientation. One only need a pragmatist sense of a wider lens through which political work might be understood and enacted.

1 Claudia W. Ruitenberg, "Educating Political Adversaries: Chantal Mouffe and Radical Democratic Citizenship Education," *Studies in Philosophy & Education* 28, no. 3 (May 2009): 269–81. This article's conceptual terrain is informed by arguments presented by Ruitenberg in "Learning to Articulate: From Political Motivation to Political Demands," *Philosophy of Education Society Yearbook 2010*, ed. Gert Beista (Philosophy of Education Society, 2010): 372-380. We will focus on the former here but selectively draw from the latter.

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3 Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

4 Ruitenberg, "Educating Political Adversaries," 272.

5 *Ibid.*, 272-75.

6 Boler, *Feeling Power*, 5; in Ruitenberg, "Educating Political Adversaries," 276.

7 *Ibid.*, 277.

- 8 Ibid., 278.
- 9 Ibid., 276.
- 10 Glover, “Games without Frontiers,” 89.
- 11 Chantal Mouffe, “Between Ethics and Politics,” 2007, podcast, 1:58:44, <http://www.discoursenotebook.com/audio/CM04-06-2007.mp3>.
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- 23 Ruitenberg, “Learning to Articulate.”
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